

Greenville Splash Masters members Jean Ference (right, in water) and Eric Woods (right, on deck) serve as instructors for their club's Upstate Veteran Swim program, which teaches veterans how to swim and helps them improve their skills in the water.



# A Splash FOR GOOD

Greenville Splash Masters thanks veterans for their service with the gift of swimming

BY ELAINE K. HOWLEY

JOHN COOPER

# OVER THE past two years,

swimming has helped Joey Freeman make some big changes in his life.

The 62-year-old from Taylors, South Carolina, had served nine years in the Air Force Reserves before retiring due to injuries—he broke his foot, and a pair of car accidents had left him with disc injuries and PTSD.

He wasn't a swimmer, so it's a little surprising that swimming would be the key to a new lease on life. "I've always wanted to swim, but I'm African American and the stigma is that we don't fool with the water," he says. Growing up in the South, the options for swimming were few and far between and the cultural barriers to learning to swim took a toll.

But about two years ago, he saw a flyer advertising free swim lessons for veterans and was intrigued. The program—Greenville Splash Masters' Upstate Veteran Swim—helped him feel better physically and emotionally. "As I started doing it more, I noticed that my back was hurting less and I was having less PTSD from the car accidents," he says. "My mind doesn't go crazy places."



Joey Freeman (middle) started swimming with Lella Reynolds (left) and Eric Woods (right), which improved his physical and mental health.

Buoyed by that good feeling, Freeman began swimming as much as possible. "Not only does it heal my body and set my mind into a meditative state, it also helps me feel free in the water. The water embraces your entire body and it's almost surreal once you relax and let the water do its thing for you."

That passion for swimming has spilled over into other areas of Freeman's life and has since led to a burgeoning acting and writing career that the retired aeronautic mechanic didn't anticipate.

This is the type of impact that led Bill Ewell, Jean Ference, Leslie Scott, and Eric Woods to start Upstate Veteran Swim, which offers year-round, twice-weekly, hour-long swimming sessions for free. The program aims to help veterans improve their water safety, swimming ability, mobility, and mental health while offering social engagement and access to a lifelong fitness activity.

Upstate Veteran Swim started out using USMS's Adult Learn-to-Swim curriculum but expanded to offer more advanced swimming support for veterans who have some swimming skills but just need to be reoriented to the water.

"We started that program because we wanted to find a way to thank our veterans for their service and share our love of the water with veterans," Ference says.

The program benefits veterans but also the instructors. Ference, who came to swimming later in life, says she just wanted to share her love of swimming with others. "I wanted to teach adults and help adults to swim because it's just such a wonderful exercise. I wanted to share what I've learned as an adult to help others get swimming."

Being able to provide those opportunities to veterans in particular really hit home for Ference, whose father served in World War II. "He had left a journal of his experience, so I had almost firsthand knowledge of what it was like to serve in the military and the things he went through and the sacrifices he made," she says.

Ference notes that for anyone who's served in the military, coming home, especially from a war zone, can be a challenging transition. But swimming can help, especially in how the veterans get to know each other and build their own support network through the swimming sessions. "We give them the knowledge, but they help each other," she says.

So far about 20 veterans have participated in the program, and Ference says they typically have about four veterans per session.

Although the program is still relatively young, four veterans have already made the leap to swimming with Greenville Splash regularly. Some are getting a taste for competition too: Three veterans swam a 50 freestyle during an exhibition heat in the middle of a recent long course meet to help promote the program. Ference says the crowd went wild for these swimmers. "It was really moving."



Greenville Splash Masters' Upstate Veteran Swim has helped about 20 veterans learn to swim or improve their swimming skills.

To build the program, Greenville Splash collaborated with Upstate Warriors Solution, a nonprofit serving first responders and current and former military personnel. Upstate Warriors Solution was already hosting programs to help veterans in their day-to-day lives, offering everything from counseling to horseback riding, but they didn't offer anything for swimming," says Leslie Scott, one of the founding instructors. "For veterans, especially if you have injuries, we thought being in the water would be so good for them to help their physical and emotional state of being."

Eric Woods, another of the founding instructors, has also been involved since the beginning. The retired high school band director has been swimming and coaching with Greenville Splash for about six years, and when the idea for the program surfaced, he was eager to help.

"It's not simply an adult learn-to-swim class," Woods says. "This is an ongoing program that's available almost every week of the year." He also emphasizes that they have worked with every level of swimmer, from fearful nonswimmers who've never been in the water to Navy SEAL or special ops rescue swimmers.

Scott says, "We've helped people who were double amputees and one gentleman in a wheelchair who, after a few months of swimming, was able to walk a lot better and didn't need the wheelchair as much. We've had all kinds of people come through the program with different backgrounds."

All are welcome, the only requirement is that participants be veterans. "Our program is multifaceted," Woods says. "It's so much more than swimming lessons."

A particularly powerful aspect of the program, Freeman says, is that it has helped him overcome the stigma and fear associated with water that he, as a Black man, has been surrounded by his entire life. Initially, he was hesitant to dip his toe in; at another pool where he first tried swimming on his own, he says the lifeguards laughed at him.

But Freeman found a supportive environment with Upstate Veteran Swim, one that helped him to develop into a good swimmer. "My confidence shot into another dimension," he says. "The fear is nonexistent." His newfound confidence, he adds, has paid big dividends as he auditions for roles in films and television shows and as he writes screenplays.

Freeman credits all of that success to the program's leadership. "I want everyone to know how amazing this program is, and it could not be amazing without the inspiration of Jean and Eric. They're phenomenal. They are perfect educators and instructors. They're genuinely warm and caring."

He urges other people of color who may be "handcuffed ... by that stigma" of the water being unsafe or not for them to "let it go" and find someone who can support you as you dive in.

"Now I try to swim *as much as possible*. Not only does it heal my body and set my mind into a meditative state, it also helps me *feel free* in the water. The water embraces your entire body and it's almost surreal once you relax and *let the water do its thing* for you."

—Jean Freeman, Upstate Veteran Swim participant

**Grants have helped** Upstate Veteran Swim soar, with funding coming from the USA Swimming Foundation, Greenville Splash, and Upstate Splash, a local charity committed to providing funding for learn-to-swim programs serving all ages. Upstate Veteran Swim also gets support from the Greenville County Aquatic Complex; Prisma Health in Greenville, which offers physical therapy to veterans along with many other services; Greenville County Parks, Recreation and Tourism; and Upstate Warrior Solution.

Funding from grants covers the cost of lane rental, and Ference and another instructor are now on the books as employees of the county, largely as an insurance requirement. Two other coaches volunteer as well. All staff are USMS-certified Adult Learn-to-Swim instructors.

Although Upstate Veteran Swim started small with modest aims to just offer veterans a safe place to enter the water and see where it took them, over the two-plus years it's been running, the program has gained traction. As the program continues to grow, Woods says he hopes they'll be able to develop programming to serve swimmers in that middle space between the learn-to-swim stage and a swimmer who attends Masters workouts regularly.

Ference adds that the sky really is the limit for the program and the veterans it serves. "Using swimming as exercise, helping with their fitness and helping them live a healthier life" are the primary goals.

But if veterans who come up through the program are interested in competing, Greenville Splash is there to support them. "We'd love them to move into Masters and join our workouts, but it's really up to them and what their goals are," Ference says. "What I want to see is just everyone enjoying the water, being safe, and not being afraid to use the water as an environment to exercise as they get older."



Greenville Splash Masters member Jean Ference is an instructor with her club's Upstate Veterans Swim program, which offers veterans an opportunity to learn to swim or expand their swimming skills.

New England Masters Swim Club member Elaine K. Howley is an award-winning freelance writer and editor specializing in sports, health, and history topics. She's a USMS Level 3 coach and accomplished open water swimmer.



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